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ABSTRACT

The booklet examines a special program for gifted readers in the elementary classrooms. Following a brief review of the gifted population and typical characteristics of the gifted child, the booklet addresses such program planning aspects as decisions regarding special vs. regular class placement. Program development issues include decisions regarding time factors, reading materials, special resources, local school policy, and teacher attitudes. Guidelines for teachers in developing a reading curriculum suggest the importance of individualization, flexible reading assignments, self-directed learning and guidance in critical and creative reading skills. The booklet concludes with a list of suggested reading activities, such as incorporating other areas of language into the reading program, allowing time for independent reading, and providing a wide variety of reading materials. (CL)

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The Gifted Child and the Classroom Reading Program

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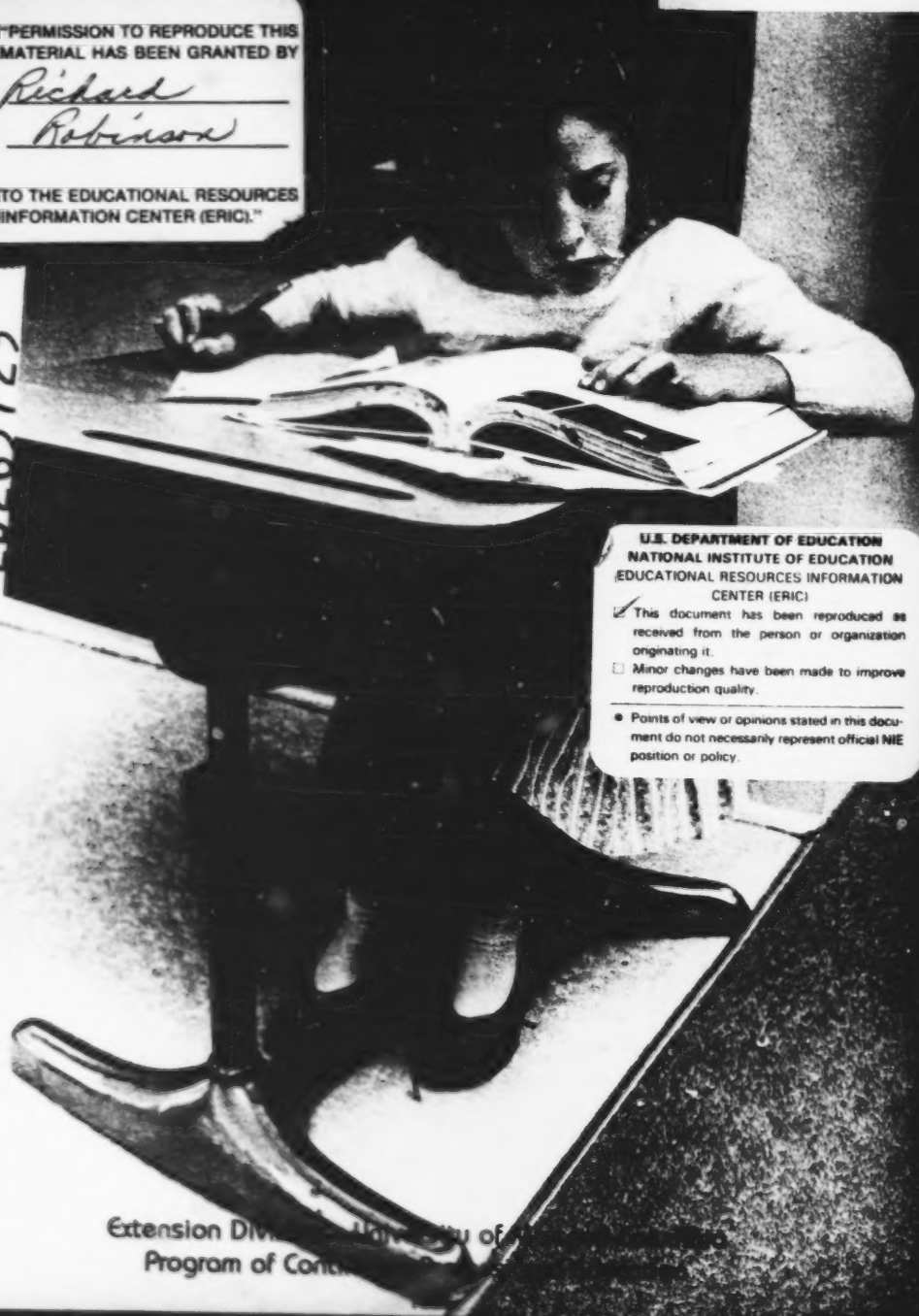

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Special instructional needs of the gifted child have long been a concern for classroom teachers. Terman's (1925, 1947, 1959) landmark study of the highly gifted was only the beginning of what has become a major area of interest for educators at all levels. Because reading instruction is at the heart of the curriculum, this subject has been of special concern as it relates to the specific learning needs of the gifted student.

Classroom teachers are seeing an avalanche of new curriculum ideas and materials designed to be used with the gifted reader. Unfortunately, these new developments are being suggested in an economic atmosphere which is not too conducive to change. With declining funding for education, this is particularly evident in new program ideas such as those designed for the gifted reader. In addition, societal pressures and attitudes, most notably the return-to-the-basics movement, have done very little to encourage innovation and change.

It is with these concerns in mind that this monograph was written. The intent of the authors is to briefly describe the gifted student and then to suggest some specific and practical approaches to meet the instructional reading needs of these students in the classroom.

Who Are the Gifted?

In the early 1900s a single intelligence test score was usually considered adequate evidence to determine giftedness. Of every hundred students tested at the time only two or three were able to meet the level of achievement required—130 or above. From this narrow definition the term gifted has expanded to include a much wider range of abilities and talents. Work by people such as Getezels and Jackson (1962) on the interrelationship between creativity and giftedness, emphasis on the culturally different child by Torrance (1973, 1977), and the compilation of a comprehensive list of the characteristics most often associated with the gifted child by Boston (1979) are only examples of research that has encouraged the development of a much broader definition of giftedness.

Perhaps one of the most widely quoted and commonly accepted definitions of gifted is taken from a report prepared in 1972 for the Congress by Sidney P. Marland, U.S. Commissioner of Education:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons (and) who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society.

Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas: (a) general intellectual ability, (b) specific academic aptitude, (c) creative or productive thinking, (d) leadership ability, (e) visual and performing arts, and (f) psychomotor ability.

Frequently, it is the classroom teacher who first becomes aware of certain students in class who demonstrate high ability in one of these areas. While at times it is relatively easy to observe these characteristics in students, it can often require subtle judgment on the part of the teacher to make an effective determination of gifted behavior. Heimberger (1980) notes that the following guidelines may help a teacher in identifying the gifted:

- Seems to "need to know"
- Values learning for its own sake
- Has advanced vocabulary and verbal skills
- Has unlimited interests and a vast amount of information on a variety of topics
- Is a keen, alert observer
- Likes to organize
- Is concerned with values—right and wrong, good and bad
- Enjoys being challenged by difficult assignments, problems, etc.
- Is aware of problems others do not see, asks questions, and is willing to change a situation to improve it
- Approaches ideas and problems from a number of perspectives, is flexible
- Produces many ideas or products, often in a short time
- Exhibits originality in ideas
- Displays great curiosity, asks questions about everything
- Is willing to take risks, is adventuresome and speculative
- Fantasizes and imagines ("I wonder if . . .")
- Is sensitive to beauty in its many forms
- Displays grace in body movements
- Shows fine muscle coordination
- Likes physical action and activities
- Is realistic about own strengths and weaknesses
- Shows high regard and respect for others
- Is willing to consider more than one solution to a problem
- Is willing to make up own mind
- Assumes responsibility and carries it out fully
- Is self-confident with peers and adults
- Is generally well-liked by classmates
- Generally directs any activity he/she is involved in
- Has a sense of humor

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The classroom teacher can use guidelines such as these to identify as early as possible those students who demonstrate high ability.

Program Planning For the Gifted Reader

In the development of classroom reading programs for the gifted there are a number of issues which must be addressed. While there are no easy answers to any of these concerns they each need to be dealt with effectively by classroom teachers and administrators before a gifted reading program is implemented.

1. The gifted reader will learn without specific instruction from the classroom teacher.

While few teachers would probably agree with this statement in theory, it is unfortunate to note that in actual practice it describes what often is the teaching situation for many gifted students. In essence, it is a belief that "the gifted child will learn despite the teacher."

It should be obvious that while the gifted reader may respond differently to classroom reading instruction than other students, this in no way removes the teacher's responsibility for instruction. The reading needs of the gifted child can only be met by providing the appropriate instructional atmosphere which allows a "differentiation of methods, materials, and means of evaluating and reporting progress," Witty (1971). Gifted children must be challenged through effective instruction to reach their full potential as mature readers.

2. The most effective approach to reading instruction for gifted children is to send them to special programs established outside of the classroom.

While there are some distinct advantages in having the gifted child receive reading instruction in special classes there are also a number of limitations to this organizational pattern. On the positive side, the reading class which includes only the gifted enables these students to be exposed to a reading curriculum that can be designed to meet the challenging needs of these students. Reading assignments, class discussion, and individual projects or papers are much more easily handled by the teacher when all the students in the class have similar abilities. In addition, the interaction of peers in a class such as this can do much to stimulate individuals in their own personal growth through wider reading.

Despite these advantages associated with the establishment of a special reading class for the gifted, there are also a number of problems as well. Perhaps the most serious difficulty for many schools is simply the lack of available funds and teaching personnel to develop this type of class. With financial support being reduced or eliminated, this factor becomes a serious obstacle when considering special instruction of any kind.

There is also the question of segregating students from each other strictly according to ability. Even though students may have progressed to a higher level in reading this does not always mean they could not profit from interaction with other classmates in various ways.

Most schools have found that for other than special situations, such as an enrichment program which lasts only a small part of the school day, the most effective and realistic approach to providing reading instruction for the gifted child is within the context of the classroom.

Program Development For the Gifted Reader

The classroom teacher must realistically consider these factors before implementing a reader program for the gifted student. Factors such as the following must be carefully evaluated before any actual teaching can begin.

1. How do the number of gifted students in class compare with the total of the entire group?
2. How much time is allotted for reading with both the gifted students as well as the other members of the class?
3. What additional reading materials are available for use by the gifted readers?
4. What special resources, such as a gifted teacher, are available for the use of the gifted readers?
5. Does the local school system have a specific policy, written or unwritten, about the implementation of instruction for the gifted child?

and perhaps most important of all

6. What do you feel is your personal attitude toward the development of a reading program for the gifted child?

In addition, there are some considerations which the gifted readers in class may have concerning their reading activities. Batchelor (1960), in a survey of gifted readers, found they wanted the following:

1. Books, time and place to read.
2. Opportunity to share with others what they learned.
3. Guidance, but not censorship.
4. Help in speed, comprehension and adapting to different types of reading.
5. Stimulating experiences from reading that holds their interest, rather than being bored by re-reading material they understood the first time.
6. Reading for information as well as sheer pleasure. (p. 32)

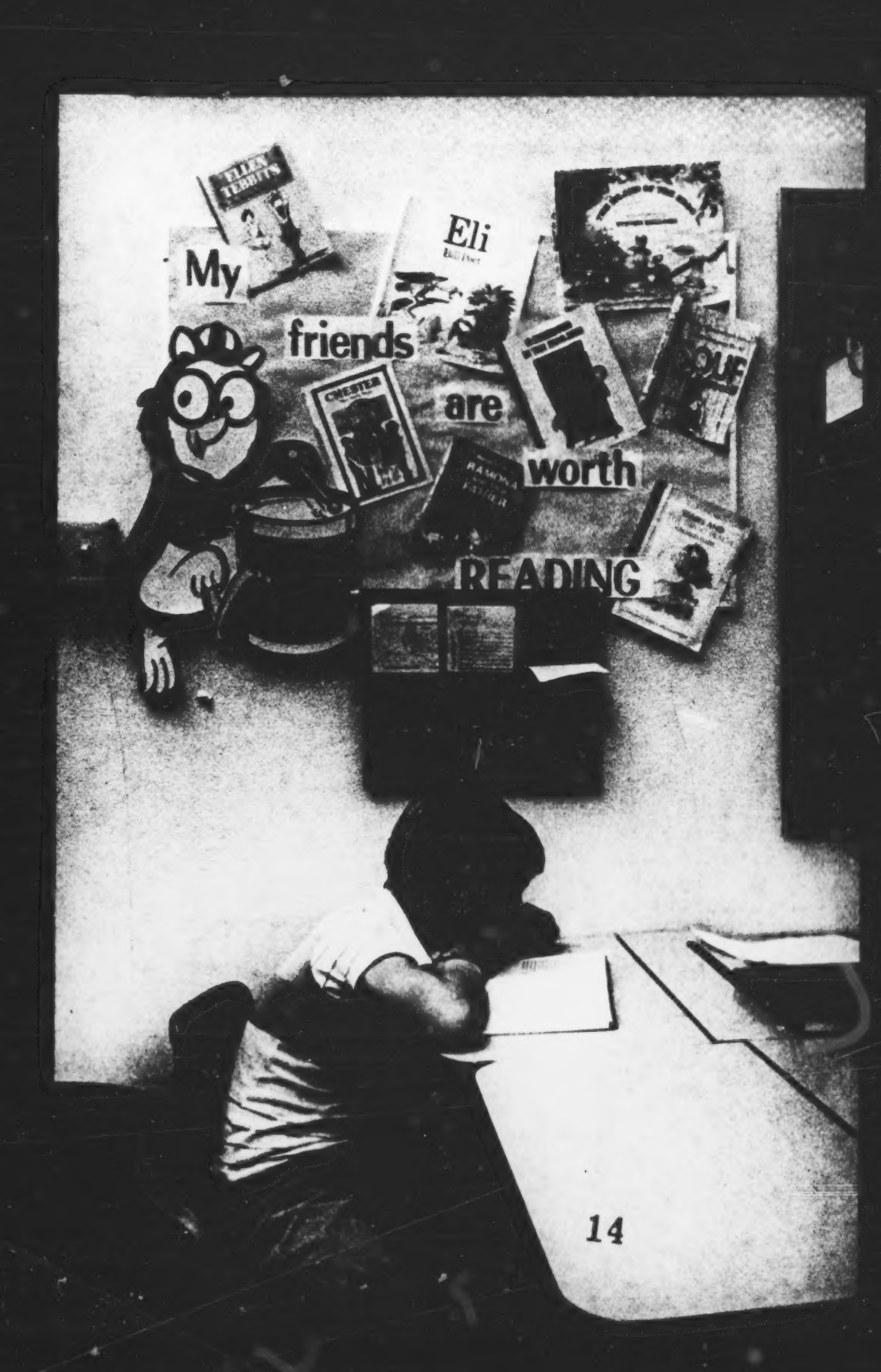
Consideration of these points should provide the necessary framework for making basic decisions on the establishment and implementation of a reading program for the gifted. If the decision to continue with the development of a gifted reading program is still positive, then the actual format and contents of the reading curriculum can be selected.

Reading Curriculum For the Gifted Student

Many classroom teachers believe the reading curriculum for the gifted students in class must be radically different. Thus, because of constraints on time and materials primarily, they conclude it would be impossible to conduct a special reading program for the gifted readers. While there are necessary changes, these do not automatically exclude attempts to implement them by the classroom teacher. It should be noted that many classroom teachers are currently following a reading program which clearly differentiates instructional procedures when working with the slower reader. What is being suggested here as being appropriate changes for the gifted reader is in many ways similar to what is already being done for the problem reader, only with different content and levels.

Bigaj (1969) has developed an excellent set of guidelines for teachers to consider when developing a classroom reading curriculum.

1. Emphasis must be placed on individualizing instruction for gifted pupils. Differentiation of instruction is the hallmark of an effective reading program for this learner. The practice of lockstep instruction is deadly for any student and particularly so for the gifted student.
2. The gifted pupil is often more capable of self-directed learning. He may want to go ahead under his own steam in reading if he is provided with some very simple directions and adequate materials. He often does not require the step-by-step instruction other students need.
3. The gifted pupil at the primary level also needs flexible reading assignments. The pupil who is forced to conform to general reading assignments for the entire class may become bored and disinterested. If this situation continues over extended periods of time, the gifted child's boredom may become habitual.
4. The gifted pupil may not need an intensive and extensive readiness program at any level, as average and slow-learning pupils may require. The readiness program must be adapted to the bright child and his needs at that time and not to the class in general.
5. The gifted pupil also needs guidance in critical and creative reading skills since his powers to do logical and critical thinking may easily become much greater than the average student's.
6. Since the gifted reader often can think, generalize, and solve problems at a higher level than other children can, he must be challenged constantly if learning is to take place and interest maintained. Emphasis on drill in reading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should be avoided. The gifted child may need less participation in class-wide drills, in workbooks, or in readers that have very limited value and appeal.

7. Since the gifted child at the primary level can gain a great deal of self-fulfillment through reading, instruction should not only assist him in developing information-gathering skills but also in becoming a confident happy individual by enlarging his pleasure in reading.
8. The gifted pupil should not be penalized by expecting him to complete huge assignments merely because of his potential. More of the same is not what is needed. An important consideration in all the reading he is required to do should be quality and not quantity.
9. The gifted pupil frequently has a longer attention span than the average learner. Therefore, one may be able to teach him for longer periods of time. He often does not require as many repetitions when mechanical or other reading skills are presented as other children in the classroom may need.
10. For the gifted pupil emphasis during reading instruction should be placed more on inductive rather than deductive instruction. Reading instruction should aim at comprehension of broad principles rather than the accumulation of detailed facts for these students.
11. The gifted pupil often displays more diversified reading interests than do other pupils. Teachers, therefore, should build on these interests during reading instruction.

Suggestions for Reading Activities with the Gifted Student

The following suggestions have proven to be particularly successful with the gifted reader in a classroom setting:

- Provide the classroom and particularly the gifted child with as wide a variety of reading material as possible. This would include library books, reference materials, newspapers, and basal materials.
- Allow the extended use of the school library for the able student when completing classwork as well as for reference and recreational reading.
- Encourage projects which require the extensive use of various types of reading materials, e.g. biographies of famous people, investigations of historical events, and reviews of current events.
- Include instruction for the gifted students on the use of specialized reference aids such as encyclopedias, guides to periodical literature, and the ERIC system.
- Emphasize reading as being a search for meaning by stressing the higher levels of comprehension such as reading to:
    1. find the main ideas
    2. determine implications
    3. develop an opinion
    4. identify the purpose or bias of the author
    5. hypothesize outcomes or personal influences
    6. summarize
    7. draw conclusions, to generalize, to get implied meanings
    8. evaluate critically
- Stimulate reading for the gifted student through the extended use of language experience and individualized reading.
- Incorporate the other areas of language which include listening, speaking, and writing, in all reading activities for the gifted student.
- Provide appropriate content area reading instruction including activities in the following areas:
    1. adjusting rate to the material and the purpose of reading
    2. using specialized content reading skills such as the reading of maps, charts, and graphs
    3. locating information using specialized references in each of the content areas, e.g. bibliographies, journals and dictionaries.
- Encourage the creative aspects of reading by allowing gifted children to respond in a wide variety of ways to what they have read. These activities could include art projects, special reports (both oral and written), drama, and individual research projects on various topics.
- Allow appropriate time for independent reading by the gifted student.

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